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Book sheds new light on 1975 probe of CIA

UGA professor draws on experience as aide in 'Season of Inquiry'

By Kent Hannon
Staff Writer

ATHENS — Ten years ago this month, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Activities began public hearings on abuses of power within the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other agencies in the U.S. intelligence community.

Those abuses, euphemistically known as "the family jewels" within the CIA, included assassination plots against foreign leaders, surveillance of American citizens, experimenting with chemical warfare and tampering with the U.S. mail.

Coming on the heels of the Watergate scandal, the 1975 Senate intelligence hearings turned up so many instances of foreign and domestic skulduggery, particularly on the part of the CIA, that both houses of Congress now have permanent watchdog committees which monitor the day-to-day activities of the CIA, the FBI and other U.S. intelligence agencies.

One of the men who played an important behind-the-scenes role in the hearings was Dr. Loch Johnson, a University of Georgia political science professor who was then an aide to committee chairman Sen. Frank Church of Idaho.

Johnson has drawn on that experience to produce a book entitled, "A Season of Inquiry," which is the most comprehensive account of the Senate intelligence hearings ever written.

Published in July by the University of Kentucky Press, "A Season of Inquiry" traces the history of the Senate intelligence hearings — from December 1974, when someone within the CIA leaked a portion of "the family jewels" to New York Times reporter Seymour Hersh, to May 1976, when a permanent Senate committee with legislative and budgetary control over the CIA was established.

Johnson's principal assignment during the hearings was to help Church prepare for each day's proceedings by interviewing major figures in the investigation — men like CIA Director William Colby, former CIA Director Richard Helms, former U.S. Attorney General John Mitchell and former White House aide John Dean — before they testified before the full 11-man Senate committee.

"Here was the CIA concealed from the public eye for all these years, and suddenly its leaders and even its middle-level bureaucrats are being sent up to Capitol Hill to answer questions about the agency under the harsh lights of public television," says Johnson, 43, who has brought several CIA officers to the UGA campus in recent years to help students in his American government class understand how the agency works.

Johnson says the enormity of the problem within the CIA was made clear to him while he interviewed James Jesus Angleton, chief of counterintelligence for the CIA, about the practice of opening and copying American citizens' mail.

"I asked Angleton why the CIA had allowed itself to get involved in these illegal activities," says Johnson. "He told me, 'The laws don't apply to the CIA because it's a tough world, there's a Cold War going on and you have to adopt certain hard tactics. It would be unrealistic to hold the CIA to the conventions of normal domestic law.'"

Among those whose mail was tampered with between 1953 and 1973 were author John Steinbeck, Nobel Prize-winning physicist Linus Pauling and, ironically, Congressman Richard Nixon. Nixon's mail was of interest because he received correspondence from communist countries, Johnson says.

At one point in the hearings, Church suggested that the "CIA may have been behaving like a rogue elephant on a rampage." But not everyone on Capitol Hill was in favor of holding the intelligence hearings or of making public some of the startling facts which came out of them.

Sen. Herman Talmadge of Georgia was one of four Southern conservatives who opposed establishing the committee in the first place. Sen. John Tower of Texas, vice chairman of the committee, argued against Church's proposal that the permanent intelligence committees in the Senate and House of Representatives be advised of the CIA's plans for covert action ahead of time.

Even more controversial was the committee's decision to release its assassination report, which had been formulated during private hearings which began in May 1975.

"The report revealed that the U.S. had plotted to kill five major foreign leaders — Fidel Castro of Cuba, Patrice Lumumba of the Congo, Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic, Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam and Gen. Rene Schneider of Chile," says Johnson.

Castro is still living, Lumumba was killed by Congolese rivals before the CIA plot was carried out and Trujillo, Diem and Schneider all died in local coups over which the CIA had little or no control, according to Johnson.

Johnson's account of the various plots against Castro, which included poisoning his cigars, hiring American gangsters to kill him and even a plan to discredit the Cuban leader by making his beard fall out, is both humorous and ghastly.

"It doesn't remind you of George Washington, does it?" says Johnson.

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